

Role and challenges of school social workers in facilitating and supporting the inclusiveness of children with special needs in regular schools

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Abstract

Dynamic of the society development is associated with extension of social problems, notably in educational context. The role of school, as the main public institution for social development of the students, is now obvious throughout the world. Consequently the role of social workers in schools is becoming essential, especially in terms of the inclusion of marginalized children from the opportunity of education, by impacting the educational system, to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Social work is focused on the welfare of individuals by increasing and developing their potential, so it goes hand in hand with inclusive education for children with disabilities, which emphasizes the children's rights to obtain a definite, qualitative and suitable education in regular schools. The main focus of this study was to draw a clear panorama of the school social workers' role towards the processes of inclusiveness of students with disabilities in Albanian regular schools. The data were collected via in-depth interviews with eight school social workers of the secondary schools in Korça region. The results showed that social service in schools is very important for helping students to develop social competences, intermediating parents in utilizing school and community resources, identifying and reporting bullying phenomenon, etc. School social workers could play a key role to implement the educational reform, which is being undertaken in Albania. Interviewees also shared their difficulties regarding the practical work, especially obstacles related to inclusive education processes.

Keywords: social work; inclusive education; special educational needs; social competences

Introduction

The right for education is guaranteed through national and international legal framework which declares the fundamental right of children for education and the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning. The education systems should be designed in a way to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs, but the education of all children based on their capacities remains a big challenge of our education system. According to UNESCO (1994), regular schools, part of which is this inclusive orientation, are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating friendly communities building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

To achieve this purpose, the matter regarding the development of inclusive education, should be a priority in the agenda of Ministry of Education and Sports and consequently in schools. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2008), article no. 24 states that no one must be excluded on the basis of disability. While inclusive education is concerned with making schools more inclusive to all students, disabled students are reported to be the largest group of students excluded and marginalized from quality education in the world today (UNESCO, 2005).

Children have the right of access into inclusive education with the obligation on duty-bearers to provide the support required within the general education system. In inclusive schools, children are evaluated as equal and the school staff understands and accepts the diversity of pupils as a natural process. Some of the principles of Inclusive Education consist of an inherent right to education on basis of equality of opportunities where all students can learn and benefit from education and when individual differences between students are seen as assets and a source of development and not as a problem. Sailor and Burrello (2013) discuss the importance of jurisdictions and school communities adhering to a core set of values that promote an inclusive environment for all students. Some of these values mentioned to Index for Inclusion (2011) are "respect for all human rights, inclusion is viewed as increasing participation, children are valued equally, the school counters all forms of discrimination, the school promotes non-violent interactions", etc.

Different studies have shown the benefits of inclusive education to develop a sense of belonging and becoming better prepared to live in the community. It fosters a culture of respect and belonging, provides opportunities to develop friendships with one another and opportunities for the future. The Law on Pre-University Education (2012), based on the Constitution determines the obligation of Albanian State for the education of disabled children. The schooling mission is not simply to teach pupils, but also to prepare them for the future. What is the practical situation of the inclusion of children with disabilities in the Albanian schools?

One of the studies recently realized in Albania stated that *"Often, children are not accepted in kindergartens and schools because school principals, teachers and other education professionals hold discriminatory attitudes; they don't know how to work with children with disabilities and schools lack facilities and equipment that could assist children with disabilities (Dauti, 2015)"*.

The data collected from this study also indicate the presence of bullying that those children experience from their peers in regular schools. There are also negative perceptions for children with disabilities. Many parents feel embarrassed, consequently keep them at home (Closs et al, 2003), depriving them of an education and valuable social experiences.

Social work is focused on the welfare of individuals, so it goes hand in hand with inclusive education for children with disabilities, which emphasizes the children's rights to obtain a definite, qualitative and suitable education in regular schools. Inclusive education is the model of education where all the learners are part of school community and feel that they belong to their class or school.

Methodology

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this research is to assess the role and challenges of the school social workers for supporting inclusive education to the students with disabilities from their perspective and experiences.

The main objectives are:

1. Analyzing the legal framework that foresees aspects of the professional activities of the school social worker seen by the optic of the work with students with disabilities;
2. Collecting information from the schools social workers on their role, focusing on facilitating the involvement of students with disabilities and their progress.
3. Evidence of main challenges of inclusion processes of students with disabilities in regular schools.

The main research questions consist of: How the school social workers percept their role in respect of the inclusion of the students with disabilities in regular schools? Which are the main tasks in the field of disability and inclusive education? How clear is the legal framework to determine the positions of school social workers and its professional figure? Which are the dominant challenges in terms of inclusion of children with disabilities? What kind of interventions they use in their practice to support the development of inclusive education and which are their recommendations for the improvement of their practice?

Participants

The study draws on in-depth interviews that were conducted with school social workers. Interviewed subjects were eight social workers who work in high schools of Korça Region. The purposive sampling strategies were used to include all the social workers that exercise their professional activity in this region. Through the literature reviewed and in-depth interviews was gathered detailed data related to the research objectives. The data analysis was performed using each of the transcribed codes of the interviewee practices.

The role of school social workers in accordance with the Albanian legal framework and literature reviewing

The service extend offered by the school social workers in all the educational system is legally approved in 2012 (implemented on the basis of pilot projects, in the past). But even after four years, the situation is crucial because in other regions of Albania it is not established the Unit of Psycho-Social Service and the social workers are missing.

For more than a year, social workers operate in urban and rural areas in Korça region. Even though there exist some directives related to the functioning of this service in educational institutions, until now there are a lot of legal gaps for the functional duties of the school social-workers. In support of directive No. 344, dated 19.8.2013 the specialists of PSS (Psycho-Social Service) evaluate the psycho-social conditions of the students and in collaboration with the teachers, school administrators and parents, they program and implement diverse services which support the educational, social and personal development.

The profile of a social worker is arranged by the Albanian law no. 163/2014 which determines the criteria to exercise social worker's profession, guarantee of ethic - professional standards in the exercising of this profession to protect the public interest, by respecting the principle of profession autonomy of the social worker (Article 2). Based on this, in Article 4 is determined that "Social Work in Albanian context is a professional activity, in terms of practice and it's also an academic activity that promote change, development, social cohesion, social justice and also empowerment and people independence" while "Social Worker is an arranged profession that is exercised in the field of social work in the macro, mezzo and micro level, in service of individuals, families, groups, communities and institutions in central or local level, in public or private system". According to Lela Costin (1978), "School social work is connected to a specific educational system, surrounding community, pupils' characteristics and the social conditions they face". By Robert Constable (2000), the school social workers should have theoretical and practical knowledge of the school institution, the curriculum, and various teaching methods for different children. Their impact is greater in the institution. In this context, the ecological systems theory became a useful theoretical model for understanding the school social worker's role. A system is an organized holistic unit of interdependent, transacting, and mutually influencing parts (individuals or collectivities and their units) within an identifiable (social-ecological) environment (Siporin, 1975). Germain (2006) uses ecological systems theory to clarify the dual function of social work: to "attend to the complexities of the environment, just as we attend to the complexities of the person" (p. 30).

School Social Workers and Inclusive education

Social work gains greater force in terms of inclusive education for students with special educational needs. Social support is essential for the general well-being.

If we narrow the functions of school social workers closely in supporting inclusiveness of children with disabilities, based on article No.46 of Albanian Normative Provisions/2012 will prioritize and generalize these key tasks:

- Social worker, in collaboration with the teachers and parents identify, evaluate earlier students with behavior problems, learning difficulties/disabilities or other developmental problems.
- In group work they compile and implement preventive or rehabilitation plans to help in establishing learning environments for all children, especially for those with special educational needs;
- Another important task is being alert and undertaking preventive activities against acts of violence towards children with disabilities.
- School staff trainings on how to make their schools and classrooms effective for diverse student;
- The specialists of the school psycho-social service have the responsibility to counsel the parents on the importance of continuation of the further education of their children with disabilities based on their abilities and potential.
- Social worker initiates researches and in this respect they conduct researches related to the needs of the children with disabilities to support or to identify and share "best practices" among schools.
- Social worker is part of the multidisciplinary commission of the Regional Education Directorate (Article 93 of Normative Provision) to evaluate children with disabilities in collaboration with the other specialists. Also, in the school team (article 95) social worker assesses the aspects of social functioning of the children with disabilities and gives the necessary orientations to improve it. They support the teacher to draft the Individual Educational Plans, to create an acceptance climate in class/school, follow up their performance, work with parents etc.

Social workers should support their work on standards and protocols that are based on the principle of the high interest of the children and their rights, etc. Respecting these standards is important to create and cultivate benevolent, friendly and inclusive attitudes and behaviors. Problems of child's social life are the main object in the theory and practice of social pedagogy, as the purpose of social and educational activity is to support the social formation of the child improving his social environment (Gaysina, 2011).

Besides the above mentioned duties, by literature reviewing and the opinions of interviewed social-workers we could say that school social worker's role is more

broadly and complex. Lewis (1998) stated: "School social work practice should be conceptualized more broadly than services provided by employees of the public education sector". Lynn, McKay, and Atkins (2003) suggested that school social workers could emphasize home visits and dialogue with parents about how to carry over and modify school action plans for home use.

They are the bridge that brings together, families, school and social services to promote and support students' academic and social success. Lela Costin (1973) outlined seven broad groups of functions in the school social worker's role. School social workers do 1) direct counseling with individuals, groups, and families, 2) advocacy, 3) consultation, 4) community linkage, 5) interdisciplinary team coordination, 6) needs assessment, and 7) program and policy development (Costin, 1973).

Findings

Inclusion is about restructuring policies, curricula, cultures and practices in learning environments in order to improve the educational system for all students. School social workers provide services to pupils with special educational needs especially in terms of difficulties they face during their inclusiveness in regular schools. Children with disability often lack age-appropriate social skills, so it is important to support them by evaluating their needs and planning the appropriate interventions.

Based on the interviews of social workers resulted that their role is very essential in the field of education of the students with disabilities. Seen from the inclusive education approach we could emphasize that all students should have the access to all available resources and benefits, schools should develop capacities and partnerships with parents, families, and the entire school community. Kent, McGinn, and LeRoy (1996) highlighted: "Social workers can promote inclusion by helping students accept human differences and working with the school to move from acceptance to celebration of those differences. In this frame work, the role of social worker is necessary. The opinions of most of interviewees consist of *"social workers have a dominant role in creating the networks of collaborations with external structures in order to address their needs to achieve a qualitative and full education for the students with disabilities"*.

Another social worker said *"One of the most important aspects of school social workers is to follow the students in the family context and to strengthen further the relation between school and parents"*.

They list a number of functions that the school social workers should fulfill to facilitate inclusive education. Some of the specific services that School Social Workers provide are as follow:

Social workers are part of the school team to evaluate the educational needs of children who have learning difficulties or other disabilities.

“We assess the children’ social development, the difficulties they face while interacting with others, familiar conditions and the needs for external services”

School social workers may provide counseling to individual children and address needs to the individual, group, and school level. They may help families to get the needed services or connect families with other community agencies. Andazi and Amwe (1995) highlighted the need for intervention programs for families of children with special educational needs through counseling, social services, family education, skill training and advocacy activities. Lim and Adelman (1997) proposed the establishment of school-based collaborative teams with school social workers as organizational facilitators, a viable model for resource coordination

Another professional activity of the school social worker in support of inclusive education consists of the identification of special needs of the pupils, to precise better their professional interventions.

Needs assessment is a broader process that provides a basis for program development in the school to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Social works should identify traces of violence on pupils and inform the authorities of child protection. One of them said:

“The bullying phenomenon affects especially the children with disabilities, so in this frame work, we should realize training sessions and awareness activities with teachers, parents and peers to improve their capacities to intervene and prevent this phenomenon”

Regarding the legal framework, one of the main challenges that a school social works encounters is the legal gap. The directive 344 doesn’t clarify the precise character of the school social worker profile or school psychologist leaving spaces for superposition or confusion.

In this aspect, another difficulty is the lack of cooperation with other school stakeholders (parents, teachers, and other specialist), because of their insufficient knowledge towards the perception of social worker as a professional who can assist in diverse activities related to education, training, socialization of pupils in extracurricular environment.

The parents of these children do not always accept their children’ disabilities, causing a lack of collaboration within the school team structure. This is more evident in rural areas because of the relationship gaps.

The number of schools/pupils a social worker covers, lack of financial and logistic support, lack of guidelines on the specific work of the social worker in schools leads to difficulties for practical implementation of social work in schools.

On the other hand, the lack of graduated social workers in these structures, (in 8 interviewed social worker only two have the respective diploma) creates even more confusion for the role of this specialty when working with children with disabilities. Some of the main interventions that the school social workers must undertake in school are related with learning of social skills which are important but neglected because there are no systematic programs which promote pro-social behavior of the children in school. To increase the attention to the issues of children abuse and in particular of children with disabilities, it is needed to draft policies within schools in order to address these problems and where the social worker should be an integral part of this working group.

Conclusions and recommendations

Inclusive education is the model of education where all the learners are part of school community and feel that they belong to their class or school. In the inclusive settings, schools should establish all the appropriate conditions in order to make learning process more meaningful and relevant for all. Sometimes, schools are not prepared to accept pupils with special educational needs so, it is necessary that the social worker at school works closely in collaboration with the whole school staff and other professionals to promote the right of equal access to education.

The school social worker is becoming a useful professional to assist children who are marginalized, including children with disabilities. The limited resources for children with disabilities lead to a slow development in comparison with other children. In order to make the education process effective, their essential focus is working in partnership with school staff, parents and home environment, as well as different structures of social and educational services in the community.

In the lights of the interviewees' answers, the main professional activities of social worker consist of creating a close collaboration with teachers and helping students to develop high levels of social skills, behaviors and fostering interpersonal awareness (specially relating with disability issues eg: accepting and helping children with disabilities, preventing bullying phenomenon), etc.

The recommendations derived by this study, on the role of school social workers, were focused on their activities to encourage students with disabilities to socialize with their peers, help the interaction between them, supporting teachers and parents by providing training sessions for increasing their capacities on disability topics, on rights

and opportunities for social and legal protection of pupils with special educational needs and also organize information campaigns with pupils, parents and teachers. Participating in assessment meetings for educational and psycho - social needs of students with disabilities, assisting in developing and implementing their educational programs, realize family visits etc.

Social workers must be active to determine their position within the school. Even though there is a similar basis of knowledge between other school specialists who work with special needs children each of them has the own field of expertise. In order to exceed the barriers and difficulties they face, it is necessary to expand the psycho-social services in schools, emphasizing the importance of socialization in educational programs, compiling specific legal directive for regulation of this profession etc. Today, the schools need a fundamental reorganization in order to let no school-age child outside its doors, by providing opportunities of potential development of all children, thus the school social workers are reference points for establishing the bridge between educational policy and practice.

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